



Everyday Versatility for Diaz

by Brian Stull

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(Busch Stadium) A year ago, Aledmys Diaz was coming off an All-Star season in which he hit .300 and the St. Louis Cardinals rookie was being looked to for even bigger success in his second big league season. Now a year removed, there's not even a guarantee he will be back with the team for 2018.

"It was a weird year, especially going from a great year in 2016," said Diaz. "Baseball is tough. Very, very tough especially with a lot of things you can't control. Even when you think you have a good performance, at the same time you just have to focus and be better every day and try to help the team to win."

Diaz played the first 71 games of the season with St. Louis before he was optioned to Memphis (AAA). He was hitting .260 with 7 HRs and 20 RBIs at the time but his .396 slugging was almost 100 points lower than last season.

"It was tough, especially everybody talking about the 'second year'," said Diaz. "I don't feel I played at the level I wanted this year. At the same time, I don't think I was as strong this year either but it is what it is. Sometimes things seem different and you have to stay with the plan, go to the minors and be back as soon as possible."

"Most of it's approach—which is maturity in the game," said Mike Matheny. "He's even said, how he grew up there was no approach. It was go out and compete, how do you compete? Some guys can survive with that, but it's hard. Most players who have

sustained success at this level are going to have an approach and an idea. I think that's still developing for Aledmys."

At Memphis, Diaz appeared in 46 games and hit .253 with 4 HRs and 26 RBIs. And as you might expect, there was an adjustment period he had to work through.

"The first couple of weeks were tough," shares Diaz. "What am I doing here? At the same time, you can't control some things, so I took that time—I have to thank the coaching staff in the minors, they helped me. Budda, Stubby, everybody there was nice to me and worked on a lot of things."

Among those things was adding second and third base to his resume. Aledmys played in 28 games at shortstop but another nine at third base and six at second base.

"I feel like a shortstop playing other spots," admits Diaz. "But I want to play everyday. I don't want to be pinch-hitting in the 7th. At this time, that's my job right now on this team, but in the future, I want to play everyday. I know I'm an everyday player at this level. So I want to be able to play everyday—I don't care if it's second base, shortstop, or third base."

"Seemed like third base was a real nice fit for him and the more repetitions he got, the better he was so that's something to think about," said Mike Matheny, who received regular reports from Memphis manager Stubby Clapp. "But I know he wants to be a shortstop and he wants to be an everyday shortstop. I just keep telling our guys, don't back off of how you view yourself and the dreams that you have. Just keep the throttle down on your work. But we're going to have to be honest evaluators as we're putting our team together of where you fit for us."

The situation with Diaz is not unlike that of Daniel Descalso a few seasons ago.

"I remember having this conversation with Descalso a number of times," said Matheny. "Telling Danny, 'man, I'm telling you, you can play everyday somewhere. I don't know if it's second base or if it's bouncing around'. At the time he kind of gave me that look because that was normally in conversation of we're not using you much, but still we see it. So it probably didn't hold a whole lot of water at the time, but you see that. You see that with certain guys and Diaz proved to be an All-Star last year, so go work. Figure it out. Keep the throttle down because there's some offense that can play there and it's just figuring out the defense on a consistent basis."

"For sure, I think I'm a better person right now and a better player," said Diaz. "I can play different positions right now and at the same time, I have that confidence that I'm a big league player. I've had success at this level before, so I'm good with that."

Since being recalled, Diaz has three hits in 12 at-bats. He's also played two innings at second and 21 innings at third. It's a small sample size, but he immediately had the chance to show impressive range at the corner.

"Right out of the box, that play coming across the infield," agreed Matheny. "It stood out his aggressiveness, right? That's one of the things we were trying to get him at shortstop—the aggressiveness to cover more ground. He comes out and you could tell, maybe the Memphis trip was a little bit of a, it wasn't meant to be, but you could tell, he had an edge. I've got to prove what I can do and I've got to improve also. And I think he was just waiting for that chance and you could tell that first ball—he might have run over and take it in front of the second baseman. It's just 'I'm gonna go get it' and that's kind of that good for you man, that's what you should be doing."

The Cardinals manager brings up another name to illustrate the need for versatility—hitting coach John Mabry. At the end of his career, Mabry had Matheny work with him on developing his emergency catcher skills. Just in case.

"If it comes down to that tie, you want to be the guy," explained Matheny. "If you're willing to strap them on—I'm not going to say that Diaz, but just another example of the fact it's probably smart to have as many tools in your tool bag as possible to help you make the club and then look for the opportunities. And once you get the opportunity, don't give it away."

"You have to be a pro," said Diaz. "You have to come to the field with the mindset to be better everyday. That's one thing I take pride on this year being able to work on a few things at the same time and be able to help the team win."

"Versatility is going to help him," said Matheny. "It's going to help him in Spring Training. Whether it's getting even some repetitions, getting some work in the outfield. Bouncing around the infield."

The St. Louis Cardinals will dictate what is next for Diaz. He is not eligible for arbitration until 2019 and free agency is not an option until 2022, which means he could return as a starter, bench player, in the minors, or part of trade this off-season.

"I don't think about that right now," said Diaz. "After the season, we'll talk about my future. I don't want to lose time on a team that maybe doesn't have a plan for me in the future. I just want to have the chance to play everyday and if this organization can't give me a chance maybe I'll have to go to another place."

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